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Habitat III: A New Urban Agenda for sustainable development

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Habitat III, the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, which officially opens today, is one of the first international conferences to follow the historic sustainable development agreements made in 2015. It provides an unmissable opportunity to translate these goals into action plans, at one of the most important level of implementation: cities.

Sustainable development and urban development are in fact inextricably linked: the world is predominantly urban, cities contribute to global social and environmental changes, but are also major actors for change, adaptation and development. The Sendai Framework states that local authorities have to be empowered for disaster risk reduction.

The Addis Ababa Action Agenda highlights the need to develop subnational financing tools. In addition to the adoption of a dedicated Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) for sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), many targets within other SDGs require strong action at the level of cities (water and sanitation, governance and multi-level partnerships, jobs, public health, climate change, etc.). Mayors and other city leaders were strong voices within the Lima-Paris Action Agenda for Climate. As the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon stated in 2012: “Our struggle for global sustainability will be won or lost in cities.”

This vision of a sustainable urban development is recognized within the New Urban Agenda to be adopted at the Habitat III Conference, which is based on the three principles of social inclusion and ending poverty, urban prosperity and opportunities, and environmental and resilient urban development, complemented with a politico-institutional dimension for action—namely multi-level urban policies, strengthened urban governance, territorial planning and financing. But the time for action is now, and Habitat III needs to go further to propose implementation solutions and tools for actual urban management. Indeed, since the draft New Urban Agenda has already been agreed on, the Habitat III Conference also aims at feeding in the Quito Implementation Plan.

A dedicated platform aims to collect concrete actions and commitments, positive multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable urban development. It is important that these actions and commitments are analysed, capitalized and evaluated in terms of their actual potential for sustainability. New techniques have social and political impacts that need to be acknowledged and factored in. The role of science and think tanks is to unpack this socio-political dimension of practices. In this perspective, IDDRI tackles several urban issues that are of particular potential interest for sustainability, analysing evidence-based changes and practices, which can be strong drivers for transformation:

- **Innovative financing instruments:** Beyond investments, political choices regarding decentralization, municipal capacity building and partnering with local investors or debt management, influence the efficiency of such instruments for sustainable urban development.
- **Collaborative mobility:** For these alternatives to contribute to socially and environmentally sustainable transportation, public authorities are needed to ensure good governance, adapted fiscal arrangements, and more generally linkages with public transport systems.
- **Sustainable basic services:** A long-term program on the [real cost of the provision of basic services in developing cities](#) shows that beyond financing models, the actual conduct of operations, the informality of urbanization, and the management of utility providers and local governance entail additional unplanned costs.
- **Open governance and new action toolkits:** In a rapidly changing urban world, new planning and management tools are emerging such as [crowdsourcing](#) through new digital technologies, or are needed to take into account and adapt to informal urbanization processes beyond traditional planning solutions. For these new approaches to truly encourage participation and tackle the needs and demands of urban citizens, transparency, accountability and adaptability of urban government are necessary.

These works point to the fact that solutions and innovations emerge in cities, through a co-production process between local authorities, private sectors and civil society.

Furthermore, the scaling up of promising projects and initiatives into public policies requires a broader comprehensive vision and guidelines to help public authorities towards concrete action. There is currently a missing link between local initiatives on the one hand and global agendas on the other, between the political New Urban Agenda and the practical solutions from the ground. There is a need for local policy agendas and frameworks that

will be actionable and can be appropriated by city leaders and practitioners. Localizing the SDGs in, for and with cities through Local Agendas 2030 could constitute such a path/solution. Similarly to the Local Agendas 21, Local Agendas 2030 could build on the vision and policy framework of the global 2015 agendas to gather stakeholders and generate buy-in at the local level.

Another step towards the success of these Local Agendas 2030 is to ensure financial, institutional and human resources for their actual implementation. Nation States, who will be negotiating the New Urban Agenda, should set up appropriate multi-level governance and partnerships and enabling environments to promote the emergence, diffusion and capitalization on such experiments. The success of the Habitat III conference therefore does not so much depend on the adoption of a consensual New Urban Agenda and a vision of sustainable cities, but rather on the mobilization of means, stakeholders and a willingness to test practical solutions in cities for sustainable urban development, following the conference itself.

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